Ref.

cahokia courthouse

STATE MEMORIAL

THE COURTHOUSE

Cahokia Courthouse State Memorial, south of East St. Louis just off Route 3, is the oldest house in Illinois, possibly the oldest private dwelling in the midwest and certainly the oldest of all courthouses west of the Allegheny Mountains.

Thought to have been built shortly after 1737, it is an excellent example of the French pioneer log house building with interstices filled with stone and mortar. The walls rest on a foundation of stone nearly two feet thick. The floors are of sassafras puncheons on walnut beams. The roof, of cantilever type, extends down over the porches. The courthouse has four rooms; the courtroom, a jail and probably two offices.

When this building was erected, Cahokia was part of the French province of Louisiana. Marquette and LaSalle failed to stop here; nevertheless, it is the oldest permanent settlement in the Mississippi Valley. It was founded in March 1699 by three missionaries from the Seminary of Foreign Missions of Quebec, Canada. These priests built a chapel dedicated to the Holy Family.

Previously Jesuit priests had traveled this section and for a time they worked side by side with the Seminarians. Finally, the Archbishop of Quebec recognized the Seminarians as sole local representatives of the church and they remained in charge for 65 years.

NAMED FOR INDIANS

Cahokia is named for the tribe of Indians that was part of the Illinois Indian Confederation. With their close associates, the Tamoroas, the Cahokias lived in a wooded strip of land between the Mississippi River and Cahokia Creek. They gathered here in the summer for their councils and in the winter ranged the prairies on their great hunts. The word Cahokia signified "wild geese."

The 1732 census showed only 12 white residents, but later it became the most populous of the French Mississippi River towns with over 3,000 residents. Of the half dozen French settlements in this section, Cahokia was the commercial center; Kaskaskia was known for its agriculture and Fort de Chartres was the governmental headquarters. These settlements of white men, with their French customs and government, were surrounded in all directions by miles of Indian country.

In Cahokia, as in the other villages, were two distinct communities—one French and one Indian. However, the races mingled in trade and worship and sometimes intermarried. General relations were close and friendly.

As a result of the Seven Year's War of 1756-63, Canada and the Illinois country were ceded to Great Britain. In 1764 St. Louis was founded four miles north and across the Mississippi River, and many of the Cahokians moved to the new community. They wished to escape the river floods that plagued Cahokia and to live on French soil. They soon regretfully learned that this side of the river had been secretly ceded to Spain by France.

CAHOKIA PART OF USA

Cahokia became a part of the United States of America on July 5, 1778. On the preceding day Kaskaskia had surrendered to George Rogers Clark and his "Long Knives." Part of Clark's forces under Captain Joseph Bowman, accompanied by a number of Kaskaskia men, took over Cahokia without resistance.

The head of the Cahokia militia, Captain Francois Trotter, and others were commissioned by Clark as American officers following the surrender of the town and the small fort. In August, Clark held council with the Cahokia Indians and after clever maneuvering persuaded the Indians to remain neutral.

ST. CLAIR COUNTY ESTABLISHED

As part of the Northwest Territory, St. Clair County was set up in 1790 with Cahokia as the county seat. The county extended north to Canada.

This structure, which served as the home of Captain Jean Baptiste Saucier (builder of Fort de Chartres) and was owned by his son, Francois, was purchased in 1793 for use as a courthouse. The first United States court sessions in Illinois and the first election were held in this building. Lands were conveyed, criminals were indicted and tried, and administrative orders were promulgated for an area that included Peoria, Prairie du Chien, Chicago and Green Bay. With a constant threat of floods at Cahokia, the county seat was moved to Belleville in 1814 and the former courthouse became in turn a saloon, storehouse, meeting hall and again a home.

COURTHOUSE MOVED

The Cahokia Courthouse was dismantled and moved in 1904 to the grounds of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis as a fair display. At the close of the fair, the building was sold to the Chicago Historical Society. Moved again, a fourth of the original building was set up on the Wooded Island of Jackson Park in Chicago.

For some time there had been a feeling by many that the courthouse should be returned to its original site. This thought became action with the start of a Cahokia Memorial Survey in 1938. Under the supervision of the Illinois State Museum this project was part of the WPA program.

The excavation of the original site was done under the direction of a state archaeologist during the summer of 1938 and the old stone foundations were uncovered and fragments of ironwork and domestic objects were found.

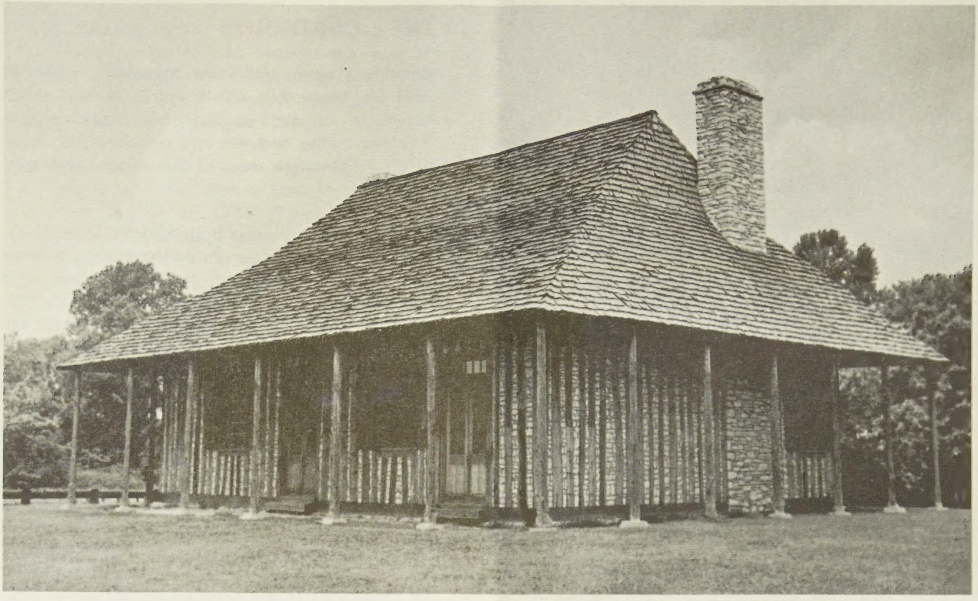
The reconstruction was made following a searching study of old photographs and sketches of the building, and French buildings of this era in the vicinity, utilizing what material was left of the original building. Artifacts found in excavating and other material dealing with the building are displayed now in the courthouse.

Other buildings remaining from the French period besides the courthouse are the Old Holy Family Church, north and east of Route 157 and the Jarrot Mansion. Closely associated with the Cahokia Courthouse is the Church of the Holy Family built by Rev. Gabriel Richard, A.D. 1799 and considered to be the oldest church west of the Allegheny Mountains. The old church is located in Cahokia and the new Holy Family church is close by, just west of Route 157.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION . . .

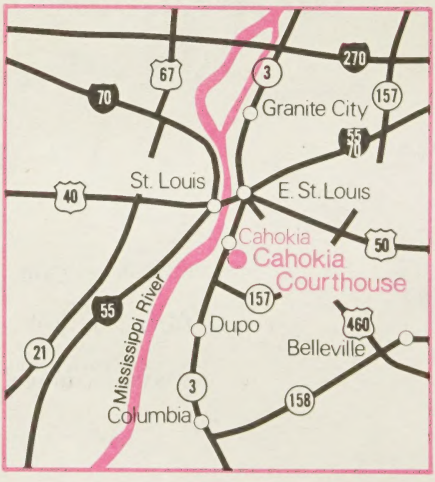
Admittance will not be granted groups of 25 or more persons to any state park or conservation area unless permission from the park ranger has been secured to use the facilities. It is also required that groups of minors have adequate supervision and that at least one responsible adult accompany each group not exceeding 15 minors. All pets must be on a leash.

Numerous state parks and memorials are within easy access of every part of the state. Lodges, cabins and dining rooms are important features of Illinois Beach, Starved Rock, Pere Marquette, White Pines Forest and Giant City. Reservations for lodging should be made with lodge managers.



All state parks are open the year round. When weather conditions necessitate the closing of park roads during freezing and thawing periods, access to park facilities is by foot only.

For more details about this site, contact Custodian, 112 Main Street, Cahokia, 62206, phone 618/332-1782. For information on other Illinois State Parks and Memorials write to the Department of Conservation, Information and Education Section, State Office Building, Springfield, 62706.



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